A case study on a hybrid class

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study of teaching hybrid classes at a Japanese university, using online tasks in a face-to-face classroom. This research was carried out during the second semester in the academic year of 2022, when the impact of a highly transmissible infectious epidemic was still pervasive. The hybrid class was set, drawing on the instructor's knowledge gained from teaching online classes over the past few years. To see whether this hybrid teaching method meets the requirement set by the university, and also to understand the students' experience and thoughts towards this method, this article analyzes the results of a questionnaire the university provided at the end of the second term.

This analysis will reflect upon such issues as the effectiveness of hybrid classes and the use of technology. As will be shown, it was found that this hybrid style English class fulfilled the institutional requirements for compulsory courses. Moreover, it could be said that hybrid teaching − using computers and online tasks in a face-to-face classroom − is an effective means for encouraging students to work in the classroom.

Keyword: hybrid class, online task, CALL

Introduction

While the effects of the global outbreak brought by the epidemic were still palpable, face-to-face teaching resumed at Japanese universities in the academic year 2022. Given the circumstances, universities throughout the country faced the challenge of providing a collaborative learning environment to incoming students. At the same time, the author had to set up the class, taking into account the possibility of returning to online teaching at short notice due to the infection. Under this unstable situation brought by the infectious disease, it was essential to secure student learning with online assignments. Hayashi (2021) confirmed some advantages of online tasks such as minimizing stress and anxiety and also

in controlling the students' individual pace of learning.

This hybrid class was devised to incorporate the advantages of both online and face-to-face classes. It was a challenge to develop a teaching method that reflected the knowledge gained from the past two years of online classes and was in line with the requirements for compulsory university English courses in the future. The advantage of using advanced technology in language teaching is widely recognized (Hayashi, 2021; Kimura & Kondo, 2022; Yamanaka et al, 2021). As Kimura (2022) suggests, it is vital for compulsory English courses to promote the Japanese students' DX competence which enables them to be more proactive and successful in society. Under these circumstances, the author conducted research on hybrid classes, examining a first-year English class she taught.

The results of the end-of-term questionnaire provided by the institution will be analyzed in order to find out whether the hybrid classes fulfilled the requirements for a university compulsory subject. The author would also like to examine whether or not this teaching method is geared towards the development of English language skills and weather it is useful for students in the future.

A hybrid class in the second semester of 2022

As mentioned earlier, this hybrid class was designed to utilize the advantages of both online and face-to-face classes. Therefore, it was important, during the process of designing the course, to clarify and reflect on the issues and advantages of using computers and online tasks. The design and reflection were based on the results of previous research (Hayashi, 2021) and classes taught during the first term of 2022. The aim of the hybrid classes was to provide classes for all students that met the requirements for compulsory English education and to make the most out of online tasks.

Issues of online tasks

The first problem to tackle is to eliminate online problems. A stable Wi-Fi environment is essential. There is also the problem of not many students owning computers. Although the university encourages students to buy computers, the reality is that not many own a computer they can carry around. Therefore, this can have the undesirable consequence of

students being forced to use their mobile phones instead of computers in class. In order to solve the Wi-Fi and equipment issues and to ensure smooth classroom management, the CALL rooms － classrooms equipped with computers which are ordinarily used to learn computer literacy － were used.

Textbooks are also an important part of successful teaching. However, based on personal experience of online classroom, the number of students who feel less need to buy textbooks, and who demand teachers to provide textbook data online, are increasing. And recently, textbooks with answers were sometimes available on mobile apps for a cheaper price. Furthermore, there are also problems with the language mode of online tasks, where, at the flick of a switch, even English questions can be read immediately in Japanese, or with the use of mobile phone translation applications. To solve such problems, a textbook with interesting contents and online task questions was chosen. Shirahata (2023) claims that in the classroom it is necessary to devise teaching materials and pose questions that are appropriate to the cognitive level of the students and that provoke interest and excitement. He suggests that questions which have many different answers, or for which there are no easy answers, require students to work hard to communicate and reflect on their thoughts. A variety of textbook topics with authentic conversations were used for devising online tasks.

Since the outbreak of COVID, an increasing number of students seems to be absent. Moreover, to avoid the spreading of the virus, students may be forbidden from attending school for a week if their temperature exceeds 37℃. The use of online tasks has the potential to help absentees and help address additional problems. However, trying to meet course requirements by submitting online tasks may not be fair to students who are trying their best to attend school. The reasons for absence may sometimes be questionable as well. Arguably, some students have become less reluctant to be absent from school. Instructors need to handle these problems raised by hybrid classes with care, and consult and get assistance from the institution they work for. The survey will help reveal what is really happening at schools during hybrid teaching, such as whether they actually motivate students and ensure attendance.

Advantages of online task

When teaching hybrid classes, the focus was on the content of the

textbook, making it easier for students to study, prepare, and review on their own. Questions appearing in the textbook were modified. Strategies for online teaching coupled with questions for students to answer individually or in pairs were also devised.

Each class consisted of about four different types of online tasks, including the one that had the dual purpose of taking attendance and setting a vocabulary test. Each session started with this online vocabulary task. The test covered materials in the textbook, and the instructor specified in advance the content that would appear in the test. By studying for the next vocabulary quiz, they prepared for class, often got good marks, and helped advance their learning.

The next task was the grammar section in the textbook. After the teacher's oral explanation of the target grammar, each student worked on exercise questions from the textbook and inputted their answers online. The online tasks required students to do a variety of things such as making choices and writing English sentences. While the students were completing their work, the teacher walked around the class, giving help and answering questions.

The main attraction of online tasks is speed. It is necessary to devise ways to make the answers quick and complete, and to make the feedback (in case of wrong answers) easy to read. The feedback should not be too detailed so that students can listen to the teacher talk. The instructor can check the work students submit online and discern the common mistakes and errors they make. The teacher can offer individual instruction and advice, based on the errors students made.

Next, students ordinarily worked on reading comprehension or dialogues. Different tasks were implemented at this stage: dictation questions that elicited responses from several students; conversation or reading practice in pairs; and submission of answers online. The purpose behind these activities was to ensure oral learning, interaction, individualized learning, and the repeated confirmation of answers. Besides recording each student's learning, the online task also had the purpose of leaving answers for students to review individually.

Quick Write exercises were also done online. At the end of each unit of the textbook, students completed a three minute English writing piece on the unit's topic and submitted it online. The amount written varied depending on the student's typing skills, but mistakes were not a concern and they were encouraged to write as much as possible. In some cases,

those who were not good at typing prepared in advance. The priority should be to get students to use English.

The online tasks made each student focused and engaged in class. Without working, students cannot make any progress. Google classroom was used for online tasks. It is a learning management system, which converts the scores obtained on tasks into a percentage, and allows each student to check her learning progress and how well she did for each task at any time. The instructor therefore occasionally used this function to show their individual progress hoping to arouse their motivation.

The questionnaire research

The author of this research is in charge of First-year English, a required, introductory course of English at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University, a private women's tertiary institution. The institution mandates students to evaluate their classes during the final week of each semester. The evaluation students do is prepared by the institution and used for all subjects. Therefore, the questionnaire reflects what the institution expects the instructors to do. The university analyzes the questionnaire results and provides them to each instructor. The instructors are expected to study the results and write a feedback to all the students they taught. In order to better understand the students' experience of, and views regarding this hybrid class, this article will review all the questions they answered.

In the 2nd semester of 2022, the questionnaire was delivered online and students were told to complete it sometime between the 5th to the 16th of December. The instructor was told by the institution to allocate 10 minutes of class time so that students would be able to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire sheet has 14 questions. The first three questions (No.1-3) require students to identify their year, department, and major. The following ten questions (No.4-13) ask about students' feelings and thoughts about the class from multiple angles: the explanations are easy to understand, the students can concentrate in class, the students can understand the objectives of the class, the teaching materials are easy to understand, the lecture method and format are creative, the communication between teacher and students is established, the homework is devised to deepen understanding of the lessons, this lesson has increased the motivation to study in the future, the student takes this class seriously, the student is actively participating in this class.

The very final section, No.14, provides space for students to write their thoughts or opinions about the class. There were about a hundred comments. Many students described their views on teaching. In order to understand whether the hybrid teaching method worked or not, this study will scrutinize the students' opinions, especially on the use of computers and online tasks.

The subjects

Almost all participating students were university students in their first year. They belonged to four different departments specializing in the humanities and were all non-English majors. There were approximately 20 students in each class. Although the school mandates students to evaluate their English classes, and even though this survey was conducted in the classroom, there was only one class which all the students evaluated. The average response rate per class was 88.75%. 6.88% of the responses were those of repeaters who took the class more than once. In total, 144 students participated in this survey.

There was an online test for streaming students into different levels. Depending on the department, there were 4 to 5 different proficiency levels. The author was in charge of eight classes, two classes from each department: two were on the highest level (level 1), four classes were on level 4, and two classes were on the lowest level (level 5). The students surveyed were not English majors, with varying levels of English and different interests.

The survey result

A five-point scale was used to gather students' opinions on each question. The responses are all translated into English by the author. The choices are the following:
1. まったくあてはまらない：Not true at all
2. あまりあてはまらない：Not very true
3. どちらともいえない：Neither
4. ややあてはまる：Somewhat true
5. 非常にあてはまる：Very much true
In what follows, 10 questions, each using this 5-point scale, are divided into three groups. A brief analysis of the data will be provided.

1) The first group of questions (No.4-6) asked the students whether they were able to: understand the explanation provided by the instructor; focus on their learning during class; and understand the main theme or point of the lesson.

In response to No.4 – whether they understood the explanation provided – the results are as follows: 54% of students responded "very much true"; 41% chose "somewhat true"; 6% chose "neither"; and 4 % replied "not true at all." In total, about 95% of students agreed that they could understand the explanation provided by the instructor. Therefore, it can be said that the students understood the instruction they received.

As for question No.5 – whether students could concentrate during their lessons – the results are the following: 54% responded "very much true"; 35% said "somewhat true"; 8% chose "neither"; 2% thought "not very true"; and 1% selected "not true at all." Nearly 90% of students thought that they could focus on their learning during the class.

No.6 asked whether they were able to understand the lesson's themes and objectives. Again, the breakdown is as follows: 46% of students replied "very much true"; 37 % chose "somewhat true"; 14% chose "neither"; 2% selected "not very true"; and 1% responded "not true at all." So, more than 80% of students had a clear understanding of the learning objectives.

2) The second group of questions (No.7-10) referred to the following themes: the classroom material; instructional strategy; communication between teacher and students; and extra assignment such as homework.

Only 2% of students replied negatively to No.7 question, which asked whether the teaching materials, such as presentations, handouts and textbook, were easy to understand. Interestingly, the 1% who replied "not true at all" was in the very bottom class, majoring in psychology. The other 1% who replied "not very true" was also majoring in psychology but belonged to the top class. The remaining students had a positive opinion about the textbook and the classroom materials. As for classroom material, this class utilized online tasks other than the textbook. Therefore, it can be said that students conceived the online tasks as comprehensible.

In response to question No. 8, which asked whether the mode of instruction was properly designed and implemented, more than half of the students chose "very much true." Furthermore, nearly 40% chose "somewhat true." Therefore, students in general thought that the approach to teaching was well designed and worked in class.

Concerning question No. 9, which asked if there was a good rapport between the teacher and students, 56% selected "very much true" as their answer. An additional 37% of students thought there was a good teacher-student relationship. In total, 93% of students thought that the teacher and students mutually communicated with each other in class.

The tenth question asked whether the instructor devised homework to deepen the students' understanding of the materials covered in class. Concerning students working outside class hours, Yamaguchi (2004) claims that it is essential for students to study both in and outside class. The length of time devoted to study can be a good indication for improvement in learning. In response to the tenth question, 45% replied "very much true", 33% "somewhat true", 17% "neither", and 5% "not very true." In actual fact, the students were never given any homework. However, according to the students' comments at the end of the questionnaire, many students reflected that they had done a lot of preparatory work for the mini vocabulary test and completing online tasks on time.

3) The third group (questions No. 11-13) concerns student motivation and active participation. In response to the eleventh question, 37% of students stated that the class motivated them to study further, followed by 42% of students who chose "somewhat true." 16% of students responded "neither." 3% selected "not very true" and the remaining 2% chose "not true at all."

The results for the 12th question were encouraging. 59% of students claimed they participated in class seriously. Another 34% of students chose "somewhat true." 6% responded by choosing "not very true" while 1% said they didn't participate.

Based on the evaluation students gave, it can be argued that the online classes were on the whole successful. To be specific, 93 % of participants said that they seriously worked during class. Additionally, in response to question No. 5, about 90% replied that they were able to concentrate during class. More than 90% students felt that the classes were interactive. Nearly 80% students thought that the classes motivated them to learn more in the future.

Students' Comments

The results also included the students' comments on hybrid classroom.

A total of 97 comments were obtained. Among them, there were more than 15 comments which referred to the use of computers and online tasks. As the following comments indicate, students candidly described their thoughts and how they felt when studying. To capture the exact meaning of their messages, the original texts in Japanese are followed by English translations by the author.

1. パソコンを使いながら行う授業で分かりやすく楽しかったです。
   Learning English in the class using PC was comprehensible and fun.

2. 英語は得意ではないがパソコンでやるのは楽しい。
   Although I am not good at English, it's fun to learn it with PC.

3. パソコンを使いながら受ける英語の授業はなかなかないのでいいなと思いました。
   I thought it was nice because it's not often we can take classes while using a computer.

4. パソコンを使っての授業だったので最初は不安もありましたが、丁寧に解説してくださるのでありがたく、不安もなくなりました。
   I was anxious at first because we had to use a computer in class, but I was grateful for the detailed explanations and my anxiety disappeared.

5. 授業中にパソコンで課題提出するのは不安だったけど、何回もやるうちに慣れたしすごくいい方法だと思いました。
   I was worried about submitting assignments on the computer in class, but I got used to it after doing it a few times and thought it was a great method.

6. パソコンを使って授業するので課題の提出がしやすかった。リスニングも沢山したので、YouTube などで動画を見る時に英語を聞き取りやすくなった。
   The classes were taught using computers, so it was easy to submit assignments. We did a lot of listening, so it became easier to understand English when watching videos on YouTube.

7. 去年と違い対面でのパソコンを使ってでしたのでわからないところを聞きながらやることが出来たので、理解がしやすかったです。

Unlike last year, the classes were face-to-face and computer-based, so I was able to ask questions and learn what I didn't understand, which made it easier to understand.

8. パソコンを使った英語の授業の方が授業に集中しやすいと思いました。わからない単語があれば調べられるし、わからなくておいていかれることもなくなりました。初めて英語でパソコンを使った授業だったのでいい発見ができました。
I found it easier to concentrate during English lessons using the computer. If I didn't understand a word, I could look it up, and I no longer felt left out in class because I don't understand. It was the first time I had used a computer in an English class, so I made some good discoveries.

9. パソコンを使っているから打つのは大変だけどやりやすい。
We used a computer, so it was hard to type, but easy to do.

10. 先生の説明が非常にわかりやすく、とても楽しく授業を受けることが出来ました。先生が席をまわってくださるので、人前で発言することが苦手な学生でも気軽に質問できていたように感じます。出された問いにどんどん答えていくという授業形式も、自分の苦手なことが分かりやすくなっていて良かったです。（オンラインタスクは）すぐに点数が出るので、自分が今どれくらい授業に参加できているか明確になっている点も好きです。
The teacher's explanations were very easy to understand and I enjoyed the course very much. The teacher went around the classroom, so even students who are not good at speaking up in front of others felt comfortable to ask questions. I also liked the class format of answering the online questions as they came up, as it made it easier to understand what I was struggling with. I also like the fact that the online tasks give you an immediate score, so it is clear how much progress you are making in the class.

11. 一人ひとり自分の（タスク）を回答しなくてはいけないので自分が何が出来ていないか授業中に理解することが出来て良い。
Each person has to complete their own tasks, which is good because it allows them to see what they do not understand in class.

12. Google フォームの機能を使って授業が行われているので、自分が間違った箇所の確認が行いやすく助かっています。
As the lessons were taught using the Google Forms functionality, it was helpful for me to easily check where I have made mistakes.

13. 授業の雰囲気もよく、楽しい授業でした。パソコンを使った授業なので、ペーパーレスで環境にも優しく、タイピングの練習もできてよかったです。
The class atmosphere was good and enjoyable. The class was paperless and environmentally friendly as it was a computer-based tutorial, and I was able to practice my typing skills.

14. 先生のハキハキとした声が良く聞こえて、聞き取りやすかったです。また、オンラインタスクを使うため、紙類などの提出を省けるので便利だなと思いました。
The teacher's clear voice was easy to hear and understand. I also found it convenient to use online tasks, which eliminated the need to submit papers and other materials.

15. 授業全体を通して雰囲気がよく、誤答をとがめないのがありがたかった。しかし、ほぼ毎回授業の終了時間がギリギリ、またはオーバーしている点や、一部の課題が個々の英語力ではなく、パソコン操作の技術に依存している点については、改善すべきではないかと思う。
The atmosphere throughout the class was good and I appreciated that I was not blamed for wrong answers. However, the fact that the class almost always finished just in time or over time, and that some assignments were dependent on computer operation skills rather than English language skills here, should be improved.

Along with the instructor, a lot of the participants felt positively towards the hybrid style, English classes using online tasks. They liked the use of computers and felt that the online task system provided the optimal pace for learning. Some found this a new style of teaching. Participants' messages revealed that, overall, the online classrooms seemed successful, mainly because their learning could become personalized. Generally, online tasks enable each student to work in class at their own pace. They can obtain the answers and feedback instantly. Online tasks enable the instructor to provide one-on-one instruction and support during class hour.

A lot of students pointed out that they liked the class format because of the combination of individual work and pair-work.

However, the result also indicated some challenges to be met. Some students were eager to have more pair-work and to interact more with their classmates during class. On the other hand, some students preferred less interaction with peers. They would not like to attend classes and only submit online tasks on their own initiative. Although students could take the classes online from home if their reason for exemption (COVID, for example) was accepted by the school.

In addition, there is the issue concerning time management. Depending on the amount of time allocated to overall instruction, individual tutorial, and pair work, it was difficult to achieve everything within the 60-minutes class time. Careful preparation of class planning and online tasks are necessary for each session.

The enrolled students were not English majors and many of them stated in their comments that they were not good at English, so it was still difficult to improve their preconception towards learning English. However, there was one unexpected benefit of using online tasks. That is, many students attended the lessons having prepared for them in advance. Students' comments revealed that they thought it was good to be able to regularly check their own progress. It could be argued that online tasks fostered instrumental motivation and encouraged self-directed learning.

Final Thought

Bates (2020) suggests that the teachers' teaching method should be in alignment with the overall academic goals set by the university. It is then necessary to define the attainment targets or learning objectives that are tailored to the needs of students in the digital age. In academia, it is said that DX and English language skills are essential for working professionals in the future (Bates, 2022; Sakai, 2019; Takeuchi, 2020; Yamanaka et al, 2021). Kimura (2022) claims that now is the opportune time for change, when university teachers have experienced online teaching. He suggests that English teachers should attempt to explore new forms of English language teaching at universities using cutting-edge technology. He continues that we, instructors of English language, should inspire university students to learn languages and experience a new era of English language teaching that adopts a wide-ranging approach. Therefore, it can

be said that this hybrid method corresponds to this approach in teaching.

The results of the questionnaire analysis show that the hybrid classes fulfilled the requirements for compulsory English classes set by the university. However, careful and further thought is needed on how to assess whether this method meets the needs of society and students (Bates, 2020). As there is little previous research done on hybrid classes, the author plans to incorporate the results into her daily teaching, and further obtain empirical data, receiving opinions and feedbacks at academic conference presentations.

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